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ABSTRACT

A study of children's language use in narratives given during play examined the longitudinal development of different linguistic systems of narrative structure: pronominal, clausal, and temporal. The narrative and dialogue in play with small toy figures was observed in eight children between the ages of 2 and 7. The findings suggest certain developmental ways in which children aged 3-6 mark different strands of text in their narratives. The data suggest that the play narratives of even very young children may consist of an interplay of many voices representing the different perspectives the speaker assumes toward events. This evidence supports the hypothesis that narrative development involves not only the acquisition of various genres such as scripts, personal accounts, and stories, but also involves the mastery in manipulating strands of text within genres. (MSE)

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Texts within Texts: A Developmental Study of Children's Play Narratives

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Research on children's narratives has shown that, by the time they reach the age of five, children have the ability to produce a number of kinds of narrative discourse, or narrative genres. Even very young children can produce scripts, or generalized representations of routinely experienced events such as birthday parties, trips to the grocery store, and lunchtime activities (Nelson and Gruendel, 1981; Nelson, 1986). In addition, children as young as two years of age can produce what Heath (1986) terms recounts, or narrative productions scaffolded by a co-present adult (Eisenberg, 1985; Steel-Gammon and Scliar Cabral, 1977). Young children can also produce accounts, or narratives which the child initiates and relates independently of a co-present adult (Eisenberg, 1985; Heath, 1986; Miller and Sperry, 1987; Peterson and McCabe, 1983; Umiker-Sebeok, 1978). And finally, children as young as two or three years of age can engage in fictional storytelling as they recreate real-life events and social roles in a make-believe context (Applebee, 1978; Rubin and Wolf, 1979; Scarlett and Wolf, 1979; Sutton-Smith, Botvin, and Mahoney, 1976).

This very brief summary of the literature on children's narratives suggests that an important part of language development is, first, the ability to represent events and actions through narrative discourse and, second, the ability to produce a range of narrative genres appropriate for specific occasions of language use. The ability to produce both fictional narratives about the exploits of imaginary animals and factual accounts of events from earlier in the day enables children to participate more fully in home and school settings. Yet, the present research on children's play narratives suggests that narrative development is even more complex: that one may find even within one narrative genre, or text, a number of strands of discourse representing the different perspectives on events which speakers may take.

The present study is a linguistic analysis of the play narratives produced by eight children observed longitudinally between the ages of two and seven. In this study, part of a larger research study of symbolic development conducted by Dennis Wolf and Howard Gardner of Project Zero, children were visited in their homes and were videotaped as they played with small toy figures: animals, monsters, giants, and people living in "strange forests". Children were given a story opener and were then encouraged to create fictional stories as they manipulated the replica characters in their play. The resulting play narratives were transcribed, accompanied by notes about children's voice quality (pitch, intonation) as well as gestural movements and eye gaze.

Voices in early play narratives

In our examinations of these play narratives, we have found that, although one can consider these texts representative of a certain genre -- that is, fantasy play narratives -- one also finds that the narratives

from a very early age contain two and sometimes three strands of text. In the example shown below, Heather at age 2;7 is narrating a story about a lion attacking a family of bears. In her narrative, Heather moves back and forth between two lines of text, or voices: a narrative voice, in which she recounts the actions of the animals, and a dialogue voice, in which characters give commands and provide "sound effects". Her story illustrates that the narratives of even very young children may be multivocal as opposed to being one singular text.

Example 1: Heather (2;7)

narrative	dialogue
Now, he [the big lion] is going far, far away. And they going in their house. And then the babies gonna cry and then the daddies gonna take care of them .... Then the baby bear gets to his daddy. Then they don't get scared and the kids come too. They don't want to be eaten up.	(lion): Roar, roar, roar. Go back in your house.
He go back to that house.	

Given this orientation towards the replica play narrative data, our analysis of the data proceeded as follows. The transcribed narrative texts were first segmented into clause units, with the assumption that any clause containing a predicate construction (verb phrase) constituted a separate unit of analysis (Berman and Slobin, 1984). Individual clauses were then designated as being representative of one of three voices: a narrative voice, in which children recount "what happened" or "what is happening" in the story; a dialogue voice, in which children encode the conversations and internal thoughts of characters; and a stage managing voice, in which children negotiate with the listener about the roles of characters, props, and settings in the play. In the interest of time, our focus in this paper will be on children's use of two of these voices, or lines of text -- dialogue and narrative -- since these constitute the majority of the narrative clauses in our data set (see Wolf and Hicks, in press, for an analysis of three strands of text in children's narratives).

The particular function (narrative or dialogue) performed by individual clauses in the narratives was decided on the basis of pragmatic cues as well as linguistic structure. Children's eye gaze and gestural movements were crucial in determining whether a particular clause was uttered from the perspective of an omniscient narrator or of one of the characters in the play. In addition, the use of pronominal forms and of various clausal types was an important determinant of the function of clauses. If, for example, a child in a neutral voice tone and with her gaze directed towards her replica characters announced, "he's going into the house", this clause was considered representative of the narrative voice. If, however, a child in a high (or low) pitched voice and while manipulating one of the characters uttered the imperative, "get back in the house!", this clause was considered dialogic in nature.

After segmentation of individual clauses in the narratives into separate voices, clauses were coded in terms of children's use of three linguistic systems representing widely different dimensions of narrative structure: the use of various pronominal forms -- first, second, and third person forms as well as deictic forms; the use of clausal types-- declarative, interrogative, and imperative; and finally the use of various temporal forms (broadly defined) -- verb inflections, sequencers, and verb semantic types. The proportional use of individual linguistic forms, taken from either the total number of clauses of one functional type (narrative or dialogue) or, in the case of pronominals, from the total number of pronominal forms within clauses of one functional type, was then examined to assess possible developmental changes in the data.

Developmental changes in children's play narratives

Given that children's use of pronominal forms and clausal types was in part used to determine the particular function (dialogue or narrative) of clauses, the focus in the analysis of the data will be on developmental changes in the use of temporal forms, including semantic verb types. Very briefly, however, there were no developmental changes found in the use of either pronominal forms or clausal types. Children between the ages of three and six used third person pronominal forms in nearly all narrative clauses and used a mixture of first, second, and third person pronominals in dialogue clauses. In addition, children at all points in time used declarative clausal forms in narrative clauses but used a mixture of declaratives, imperatives, and questions in dialogue segments.

There were, however, some interesting developmental changes in terms of children's use of the temporal system. First, as was shown in the earlier example of Heather's narrative at age 2;7, very young children tend to use the present tense, along with gonna and the English progressive form, to describe ongoing events in their replica play narratives. Between the ages of three and six, however, one finds a dramatic increase in the use of past tense forms to encode events in the narrative voice, whereas in the dialogue voice one finds a steady use of present tense forms across age levels. In Figures 1 and 2 shown below, which illustrate this developmental change, data from narratives are collapsed into four age levels. All data from narratives between the ages of 2;7 and 3;6, for example, have been collapsed into the age level of three years.

-- insert Figures 1 and 2 here --

In addition to this change over time, there were changes both in the use of semantic verb types and in the use of temporal sequencers. Verbs were coded as being one of four semantic types: event verbs, encoding goal-directed actions such as take, go, scare; process verbs, encoding non-punctative actions such as swim, play, and jump; internal state verbs, encoding character states such as feel, think, and be-happy; and finally relational verbs, encoding physical states such as be-in-the-pond, stay, and be-a-giant. In Figures 3 and 4 below, the percentage use of three of these semantic verb types -- event, internal state, and relational -- is shown for four age levels and within the two strands of text, narrative and dialogue. One can see from these figures that there is an increase over time in the use of event verb types in the narrative strands, whereas

in the dialogue strands there is an increase over time in the use of internal state and relational verbs.

-- insert Figures 3 and 4 here --

Finally, our analyses of the data revealed developmental changes in children's use of additive (and) and of sequential (then, and-then) connectives. Within the narrative strands of text, there was an increase over time in the use of both additive and sequential connectives, whereas within dialogue strands of text, there was almost no use of these kinds of linguistic forms. Figures 5 and 6 below illustrate this pattern in the use of sequencers, and Figure 5 illustrates in addition a slight decrease between the ages of five and six in the use of additive forms. This decrease may be due to some changes, to be discussed in a section below, in the ways in which children encode events within narrative strands.

-- insert Figures 5 and 6 here --

This differential use of the temporal system within strands of text may best be illustrated through case studies of two of the eight children in our study. In the example below, Heather, the same child whose narrative at age 2;7 was examined earlier, creates a story about a family in the "strange forest". In contrast to her narrative at 2;7, however, her play narrative at age 3;5 contains past tense forms, sequencers, and a large number of event type verbs within narrative strands. In the dialogue strands, Heather uses the present tense as she did at age 2;7, but at age 3;5 she also focuses more heavily on the physical and internal states of characters.

Example 2: Heather (3;5)

narrative	dialogue
Once upon a time the baby and the mommy and the daddy, they walked through the forest to find a house and said ...	
	There's a porch.
Then they found a porch! She found a porch, and then he found a porch, and then they walked through the forest.	
	(baby): Where's my mommy and daddy?
And then the mommy goes ...	
	(mommy): Hi (baby): Hi, Mommy. I want to go for a walk.

In the additional examples shown below, Jonathan at age 3;6 uses past tense forms to encode events in narrative strands and uses present tense forms and gonna to encode dialogue strands. At age 4;11, one also finds that the character speech within the dialogue strands contains references to characters' thoughts and feelings.

Example 3: Jonathan (3;6)

narrative	dialogue
The monster came struggling. Walked down to the tippy, wippy little house.	(monster): I'm gonna knock your ... knock, knock, knock, who's there?

Example 4: Jonathan (4;11)

narrative	dialogue
This was the land of funny men. And then the guy [an animal] came. And he said ...	(animal): What's the matter? (giant): I got lost. Well, what's this land called? (animal): Funny land. What do you think it's called?

The endpoint of the study: the narratives of five and six year olds

After age four, and generally between the ages of five and six, one finds evidence of an increasing versatility in how children move between narrative and dialogue strands of text. Children by age five begin to demonstrate that a variety of functions can be performed within these two voices. Narrative strands in general represent "what happened" in the story, but one can also within narrative strands make comments on characters' emotional and physical states. Dialogue strands in general represent online conversation between characters, but the omniscient narrator can also use dialogue to both recall and project events. The examples shown below from Heather at age 4;11 and Jonathan at age 5;11 illustrate this additional kind of developmental phenomenon.

Example 5: Heather (4;11)

narrative	dialogue
	(giraffe): I'll eat some grass. Yum, yum. Let me eat some leaves from the earthquake last night. Did you know that there was an earthquake last night? (duck): Oh, no. (animals to giant): What have you done? (giant): [I] took your bath and

I made a little pond for you. I gave you a nice present to the little animals. They lived in the forest once long ago. They came this year ....

Example 6: Jonathan (5;11)

narrative	dialogue
For days and days the giant made the pond his bath. The animals were thirsty and they usually had fights with the little wierdos. And then ... one day the giant came back.	
	(giant): Ahhh, trees.
They're apple trees.	
	(giant): I shall use these apples for me to eat. I shall take all of them.
So he ate apples and was happy	

In Heather's narrative age age 4;11, the character of the giant recalls some previous events in the story, so that his utterances sound like those which might have been previously found only within narrative strands of text. And yet, Heather by age five has the linguistic skills enabling her to represent past events in the voice of one of the replica play characters. Similarly, in Jonathan's narrative at age 5;11, the character of the giant projects events which will occur in the story ("I shall use these apples for me to eat"), and the narrator of the story both recasts the giant's speech ("so he ate apples") and expresses the emotional status of the giant ("and was happy"). These examples point out the complexity of children's play narratives by age six: not only are children's narratives multivocal, but separate voices may also perform a wide variety of functions in the narrative.

Conclusion: Intertextuality in children's play narratives

The findings presented in this paper suggest certain developmental changes in the way in which children between the ages of three and six mark different strands of text in their narratives. The data from the study suggest that the play narratives of even very young children may be multivocal, consisting of an interplay of voices representing the different perspectives which the speaker assumes with respect to events. This research supports the hypothesis that narrative development involves not only the acquisition of various genres, such as scripts, personal accounts, and stories; it also involves the mastery of skill in manipulating strands of text within genres. Perhaps it is then useful to look at children's narratives not only in terms of the development of skill in representing events and actions but also in terms of children's utilization of linguistic systems to represent texts within texts.

Figure 1.
Percentage Use of Verb Inflections in Narrative Strands

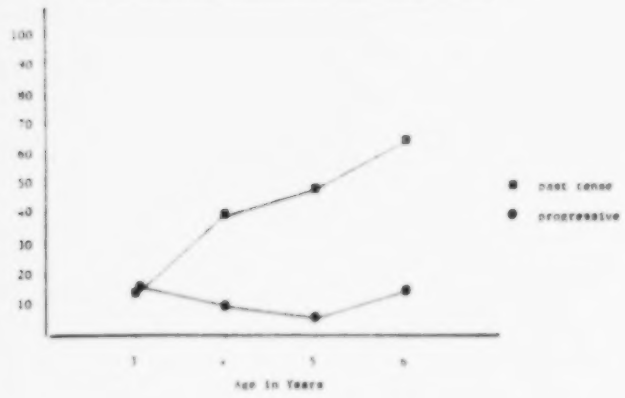


Figure 2.
Percentage Use of Verb Inflections in Dialogue Strands

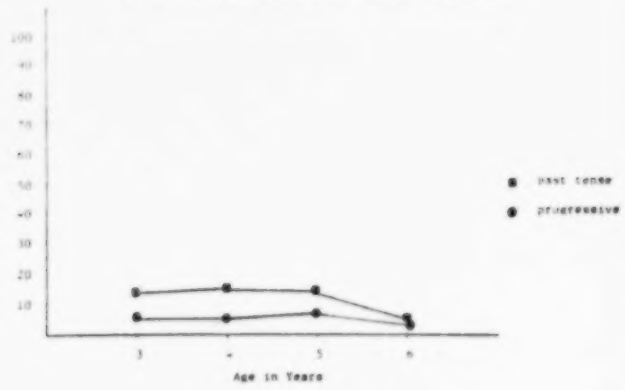


Figure 3.
Percentage Use of Verb Types in Narrative Strands

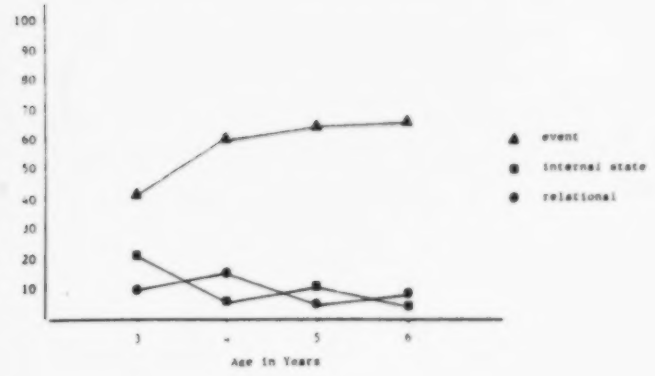


Figure 4.
Percentage Use of Verb Types in Dialogue Strands

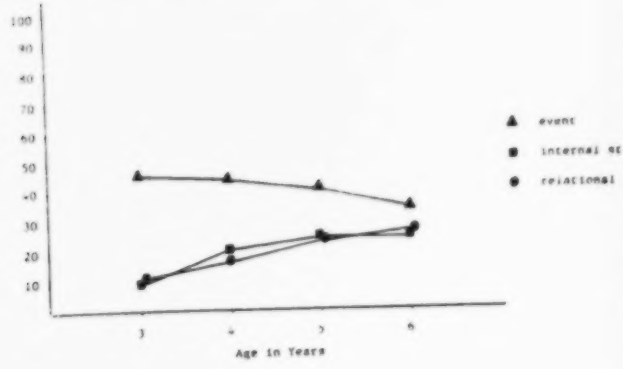


Figure 5.
Percentage Use of Additive and Sequential Connectives in Narrative Strands

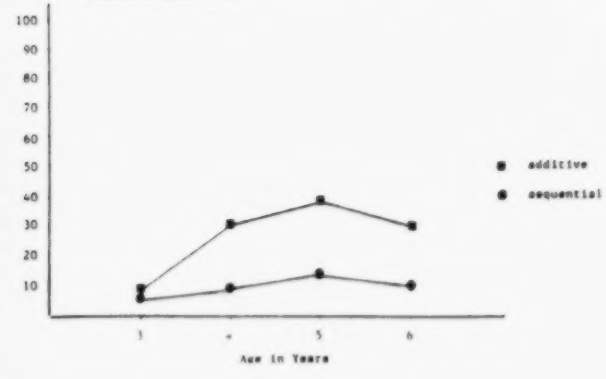
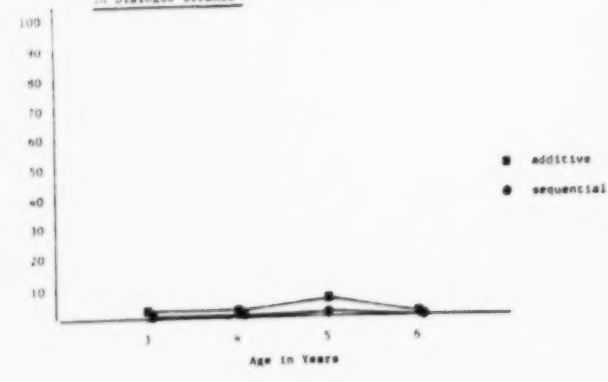


Figure 6.
Percentage Use of Additive and Sequential Connectives in Dialogue Strands



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